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Strategies for Enhancing the Mature Student Experience in Higher Education

John O'Carroll

Technological University Dublin, john.ocarroll@tudublin.ie

Cathy Ennis

Technological University Dublin, cathy.ennis@tudublin.ie

Keith Loscher

Technological University Dublin, keith@lme.ie

Deirdre Ryan

Technological University Dublin, deirdre.ryan@mic.ul.ie

Niall Dixon

Technological University Dublin, niall.dixon@tudublin.ie

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Strategies for Enhancing the Mature Student Experience in Higher Education

Cathy Ennis, Niall Dixon, Keith Loscher, John O'Carroll*, Deirdre Ryan**

***Dublin Institute of Technology**

****Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick**

Introduction

A principle of the Irish Education system is its endorsement of equity of access to higher education for all Irish citizens. This principle has been enacted through successive government policies including the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (HEA, 2015). The aim of this policy is to *“ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”* (p.8). Data from this plan shows that participation in higher education by the adult population has increased and that there is a potential for increasing the overall educational attainment levels of the adult population as a whole.

Mature students are those aged 23 years or over. Among the many reasons why mature students enter full time higher education are; career orientations, replacing of redundant skill sets, being a role model for children, the enjoyment of learning. Our objective is to examine the literature relating to curriculum design, in particular, teaching (including technology), learning and assessment strategies and how programme and module designers (new and longstanding lecturers) might support the needs of mature students within a programme/module. The report also provides information on policy and statistics of the current mature education landscape in Ireland.

The report is broken down into five sections. Following a number of brainstorming sessions (see Appendix 1 for concept map) we focused on five areas;

- Policy
- Mature Student Statistics
- Mature Student Experience
- Teaching and Learning
- Educational Technology

We felt these areas were important for setting the context, highlighting existing structures, drawing attention to the numbers of mature students in Higher Education and highlighting their distinguishing needs. We wanted to identify strategies from the literature that would promote inclusivity of mature students and to examine teaching and learning strategies that could be used in the classroom, as well as technologies that can enhance the student's' learning experience. Upon beginning our research, it became clear that the first two points (policy and statistics) were closely related, and that we needed to include a new topic (Assessment and Feedback).

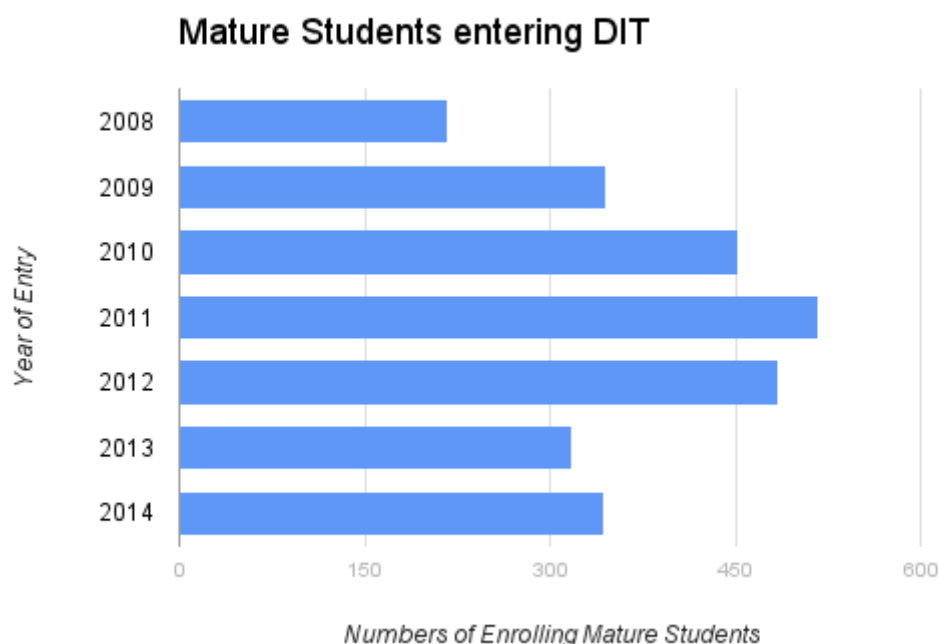
The output from this project includes a website (www.njkcd.wordpress.com) which summarises the points that lecturers might consider regards to how to enhance and facilitate the mature student learning experience when designing curricula. The website contains a link to the five areas which we feel are important to consider when designing a curriculum or module.

Literature Review

Policy and Statistics

The number of mature students attending third level institutions has seen a dramatic rise in numbers in recent years. A third of undergraduate students in New Zealand are over 24 years of age (Ministry of Education, 2013). In Canada, 23.3% of undergraduates are 25 years or over (Statistics Canada, 2013). Europe has seen similar increases in mature student numbers, such as Italy where those over 22 years of age has increased to 20.6% in 2005.

In Ireland, mature students accounted for 13.6% of full-time undergraduate new entrants in 2009/10 rising to 15% in 2011-12 (HEA, 2012). Looking at Figure 1, the number of mature students entering DIT peaked in 2011 at 517 equating to 1560 mature students enrolled in the college during that year.



*Figure 1 - Number of mature students enrolling in DIT between 2008 and 2014.
(Source: DIT Widening Participation Strategy. Academic Council, June 2015)*

Equal access to higher education is a key objective of the System Performance Framework (HEA, 2011). The Department of Education and Skills current and projected breakdown of

student numbers is displayed in Figure 2, showing that the Irish government envisages a further increase of mature student numbers to 2025 and a levelling off to 2030.

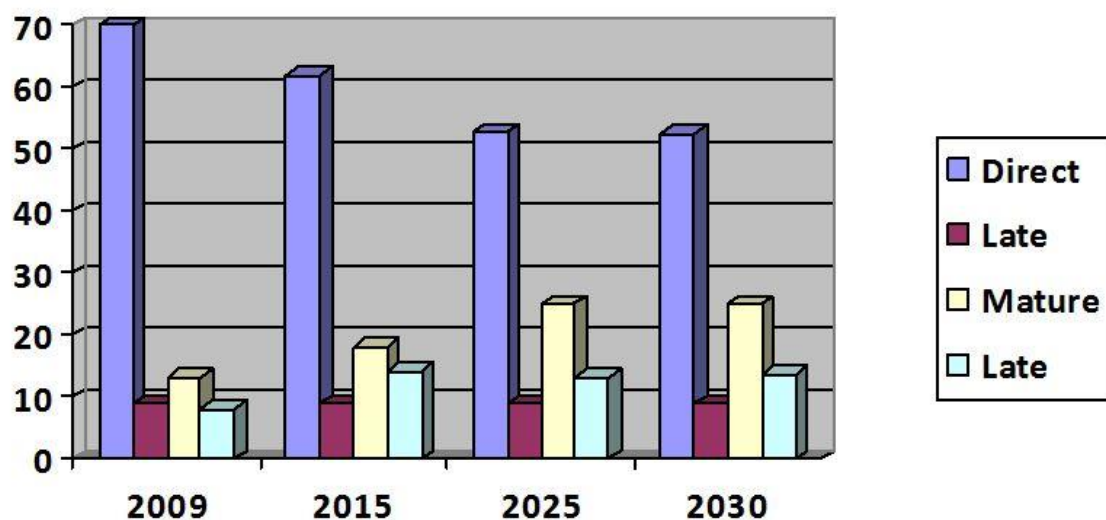


Figure 2 – New entrants to higher education, current and projected demand (Source: HEA, 2011).

This forecasted increase in the number of mature students entering our third level institutions reinforces the need to have a strategies in place for lecturers when designing curriculum. Before considering the literature on implementing such strategies, it is first necessary to examine the expectations of mature students, and how their experience and motivations may differ from traditional students.

Experience, Expectations and Motivations of Mature Students

Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, and Godfrey (2004), categorise mature students as highly motivated, possessing a “...stronger sense of purpose...” (p. 21). For mature students who are first-in-family to attend HE, they can become a role model for their children. While mature students are highly motivated, there are certain factors which can cause difficulties and lead to mature students not fulfilling their educational goals:

- Financial pressures (They are typically the breadwinners and responsible for their family)
- Not engaging socially with traditional entrants (balancing college & family life)
- Time management
- Organisational skills
- Adapting to college life (Taylor, 2006; Risquez, Moore & Morley, 2007).

When designing curricula, lecturers should be aware of the issues that mature students encounter. These include a lack of academic skills, which frequently lead to withdrawal (Risquez, Moore, and Morley, 2007). There exists a mostly unfulfilled expectation that their distinctive circumstances are recognised and acknowledged by flexible learning supports (Fleming, 2010, p.13). It is important that these supports are put in place so as not to set apart

these students from traditional students. Kenny (2010) points out that these supports should be provided “...without stigma or condescension...” (p.15).

However, mature students possess a confident ability in approaching teaching staff. They are able to make connections with the working world and have an ability to apply their newly gained knowledge to real world situations (Risque et al, 2007). How we can harness these skills in terms of our teaching and learning approach are detailed in the next section.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Considering the dramatic increase in mature students in full-time Higher Education (HE) and the distinctive characteristics of mature students, universities need to reassess their teaching and learning strategies and look to different methods to enhance mature students’ learning experiences in higher education.

The learning environment should be interactive and collaborative to include all students regardless of their learning needs. A strategy that could be considered is the student-centred learning approach, where knowledge is constructed by the student and the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information. Another consideration could be Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005). PBL encourages deep learning on a topic, with mature students applying theoretical knowledge gained from the lectures with a view to increasing their topic understanding, developing their research, group interaction, problem solving and team working skills.

The use of technology in the classroom is another challenge to new and existing teachers. One such strategy is the use of blended learning to improve their study experiences, learning outcomes and the overall academic achievement (Poon, 2013). We discuss this in more detail in the Educational Technology section.

Finally, assessment and feedback are directly linked to teaching and learning strategies. Lecturers should consider the assessment method that best realizes the subject teaching objectives. Research has shown that students benefit from appropriate feedback and become able to self-assess and monitor their own learning and development (Tett et al, 2102). We will consider relevant assessment and feedback approaches in more detail below.

Assessment and Feedback

Summative assessment quantifies student learning and will determine the award the student receives (O’Neill, 2015, p.75). The role of formative assessment is to generate feedback on performance, leading to improved and accelerated learning (Sadler, 1998). Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that students can be empowered through formative assessment and feedback to promote good self-regulation skills in students. Self-regulation is defined as “*the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process*” (Zimmerman, 2008, p.167). Studies have shown that adult learners are often intrinsically-motivated, deep learners (Tan, 2006; Zeegers, 2001). Zeegers (2001) found age to be a more positively-correlating factor with a deep approach to learning where students are required to integrate new with old

knowledge. Adult learners may be disempowered by conventional assessment strategies which promote a surface-level approach (Leach, Neutze & Zepke, 2001). Hay, Tan & Whaites (2010) advocate a change from assessment in which the lecturer has full control to one where there is a partnership between the lecturer and the learner, empowering the learner and allowing their voice to be heard. They believe that assessment, which allows for “*critical reflective knowing*”, could lead to a transformation of ideas and practice (p.580). Enthusiasm and encouragement of original work which will promote deep learning in all students may be generated using the following tips:

- Keep the goals of the course in mind
- Develop clear marking criteria for students to use
- Scaffold students, particularly in their first year of study
- Model how to complete tasks in class (www.newcastle.edu.au/ctl)

Typically, exams tend to focus on memory-related activities and assignments on application-based activities for deeper learning. Particular assessment formats can be classified under four headings (Biggs 2011):

- **Extended prose** is essay-type forms of assessment e.g., the typical timed examination, open-book examination, take-home assignment.
- **Objective formats** e.g., multiple-choice type tests, while they have great coverage and are convenient, they are best used to supplement other forms of assessment.
- **Performance assessment** e.g., presentations and interviews, requires students to perform tasks that mirror real life, so there is no single correct answer. They are best for functioning knowledge and should not become a substitute for teaching.
- **Project based assessment** focuses on functioning knowledge applied to a hands-on piece of research. Reflective journals are useful for assessing content knowledge, judgement and application.

If, as suggested by Abbott-Chapman et al. (2004), mature learners are highly-motivated and possess a strong sense of purpose, good feedback should enhance their ability to self-regulate by providing a benchmark for good performance. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) outline seven principles of feedback which will support and develop self-regulation skills. They suggest that feedback should help to clarify what good performance is and facilitate the development of self-reflection in the learner. Feedback should encourage teacher-peer dialogue around learning and provide an opportunity to close the gap between current and desired performance (p.205).

Educational Technology

The use of Technology (e-learning) in HE has been a big issue for staff, with challenges to its success revolving around staff competency and training (Rogers, 2000). The variety of technology-based educational tools is extensive. Some relevant examples of successful technology are tools that promote flexibility, which is key to a successful learning experience for mature learners (e.g., Virtual Learning Environments, YouTube).

Mature students tend to be more positive towards e-learning than traditional students, possibly because of their need to balance studies with the demands of family and

employment (O'Driscoll, 2010). Sometimes traditional students are fearful of asking questions on public forums "*for fear of looking stupid*", this is not an issue with mature students, so may further explain the success of technology (Waycott, 2010). Other studies have found mature learners to be enthusiastic particularly when using mobile technologies to enhance learning (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2012).

While there are advantages for technology in HE, there are also potential pitfalls. O'Driscoll (2010) found staff expertise in adapting their teaching for non-traditional students was inconsistent, leading to uneven integration of technology. There were also concerns regarding the impact of flexible learning on attendance for face-to-face sessions proving detrimental to the student longer-term, particularly for less disciplined students (Álvarez-Trujillo, 2008). Finally, there could be challenges for mature students having less experience with/access to ICT and Internet (Margaryan, 2011).

Some recommendations to promote successful implementation of Technology Enhanced Learning are:

- Ensure consistent integration of technologies into teaching activities (O'Driscoll, 2010)
- Use tools to lay a deliverables road-map, allowing students to plan in advance (O'Driscoll, 2010)
- Promote online support and resources (O'Driscoll, 2010)
- Support all students in reaching a baseline level of digital literacy (O'Driscoll, 2010)
- Develop reusable learning objects to facilitate students to study at their own pace (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007)

Conclusion

The Department of Education and Skills statistics predict that by 2025, 25% of student entrants will be mature. It is imperative that there is an acknowledgement of the teaching and learning resources and support needed to assist this growing cohort. There is a responsibility for HE institutions to build these supports into the curriculum to minimise negative experiences.

While there are more complex factors outside the control of a lecturer, overall, there is clear agreement that mature learners require more flexibility in terms of delivery of material, and they benefit from deeper learning assessments. With a changing landscape, and increased diversity in our classrooms, it is increasingly important to make educators aware of how they might adapt their teaching to ensure inclusivity for all. We hope that the literature reviewed above and the subsequent development of a website resource will provide answers for new and existing lecturers when seeking guidance on how best to facilitate the mature student learning experience.

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